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# scottish justice matters

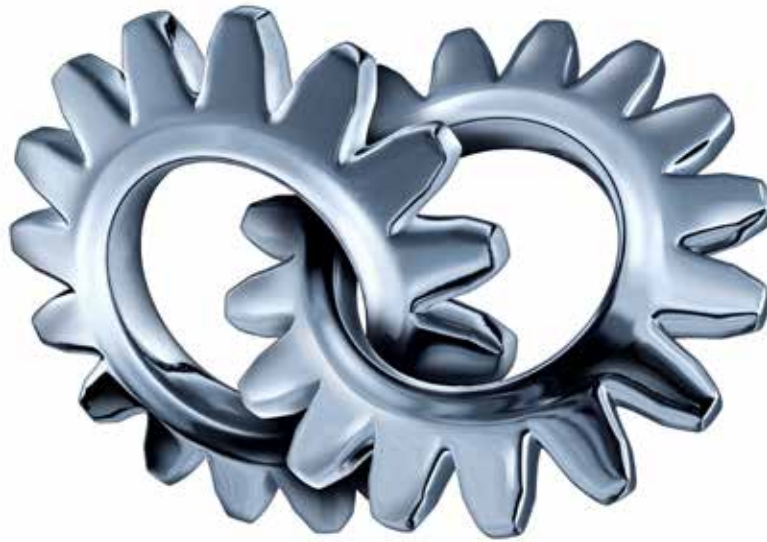
## POLICING

Reflections on developments and  
changes to policing in Scotland

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## Scottish Police Force Amalgamations and Mergers: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

**Louise Jackson, Neil Davidson and David Smale**

**MODERN POLICE FORCES** emerged as a result of local initiatives from the late-eighteenth century onwards. Glasgow City Police, founded in 1800, was the first in Britain, and in 1857 all Scottish towns and counties were compelled by act of Parliament to create their own police forces or constabularies. However, almost as soon as this nationwide patchwork of local provision came into being, calls for amalgamation were being put forward by civil servants and senior police officers. Indeed, the idea of a single policing body for Scotland can be dated back to the 1850s. Why, then, did it take so long to be realised? Examination of the earlier history of amalgamation enables us to better understand the uniqueness of the circumstances that produced Police Scotland in 2013.

It is often suggested there was an inexorable pull towards centralisation and consolidation. The number of police forces in Scotland was reduced from 89 in the late 1850s, to 48 by 1939, 33 by 1959 and finally eight from 1975 until 2013. Yet the creation of a single service was far from inevitable. The number of county constabularies in rural areas remained remarkably constant for the first 100 years, whilst reductions in the number of burgh (urban) forces were mainly concentrated in the 1930s and 1960s (Figure 1). Indeed, the eight regional 'legacy' forces lasted for 40 years.

Comparing the very recent reorganisation of policing in Scotland with the Netherlands, Terpstra and Fyfe have argued that a combination of factors (consistent with change in other areas of policy) helped generate reform. They point to the opening of a 'window of opportunity' created by specific crises or focusing events, including the threat of international terrorism and organised crime as well as pressures on public spending (Terpstra and Fyfe, 2015). Key individuals or 'policy entrepreneurs', with skills, resources and influence, have then

acted as important agents for change. However, their capacity to act was enabled by wider political and cultural factors (devolution and the election of a majority SNP government).

Moreover, it was important that identification and analysis of the 'problem' chimed with policy solutions that were already in circulation. We argue here that this framework, which focuses on the existence (or lack) of policy windows, the role of policy entrepreneurs, the coupling of problems and solutions, and a responsive political context, is also useful in explaining past inertia and resistance as well as previous piecemeal reform.

There have been earlier moments of national crisis in which the arguments for a single policing body were made in Scotland. We also find early 'policy entrepreneurs' drawn from the new but growing elite of influential professional policemen who sought to promote the idea of a national service. Yet until very recently there was no coherent alignment of politics and policy solutions.

The first of these entrepreneurs was Alfred John List, the innovative head of Midlothian Constabulary who, in 1853 put forward a plan for a national system of police commanded by one chief constable (Second Report, 1852-3, Q3960). However, his ideas did not meet the approval of his political task masters who did not see it as a relevant solution to a recognisable problem. A few decades later, in 1886, the Crofters' Protests in Skye and Lewis provoked Captain David Munro, HM Inspector of Constabulary for Scotland (HMICS), to draw up a plan for the creation of a national force commanded by a Chief Commissioner in Edinburgh, with the country divided into police districts. At the time it was mooted that violent disturbances had been exacerbated by Irish agitators, intensifying fears of a combined external and internal threat (Cameron, 2012). As the disturbances petered out so too did the plan.

During the Second World War emergency powers were introduced across Britain authorising government officials to enforce police force amalgamations if in the interests of military operations. Senior civil servants at the Scottish Office were convinced, in theory at least, that the nationalisation of policing was needed on a UK basis. Yet Tom Johnston, as Secretary of State for Scotland in the wartime coalition government, was reluctant to move because he thought it would neither be popular nor resolve broader problems relating to policing and security. The emergency powers remained a “dead letter in Scotland” (NRS, HH55/360). This contrasted with England and Wales where police forces on the south coast were amalgamated in 1943 and a further set of mergers took place in 1946 (Emsley, 1996).

The lack of a responsive political context for amalgamation in Scotland was a key factor that hampered efforts to consolidate police forces until the 1960s. During the course of the nineteenth century local policing meant local control through local government. Despite the increasing regulatory role of central government, services continued to be organised and delivered at the local level through a relationship of interdependence. In the years after the First World War both the UK administration (at Westminster) and the Scottish Office (newly located to Edinburgh after 1926) pressurised police forces to amalgamate on grounds of efficiency as did HMICS. In 1933 the Police Consolidation (Scotland) Committee proposed that the number of Scottish forces should be reduced to 14, although it drew short of endorsing the idea of a national force. Although supported by the cities of Edinburgh, Glasgow, Dundee and Aberdeen, the proposals were put on ice when they were vehemently opposed by the 15 remaining Royal Burghs. Scottish municipal government fought to retain local control of police forces throughout the 1940s and 1950s, with the burghs of Inverness, Motherwell and Ayr at the vanguard of resistance.

The political climate began to shift in the 1960s with wider recognition of the pace and significance of technological change, of professionalised models of policing, and of economies of scale. The 1962 Royal Commission argued that something should be done about the “extreme case of the multiplicity of small forces” in Scotland (1961-2, s. 281). Indeed the Scottish Police Federation advocated a single force as policy from the 1960s until 1976. This shifting opinion enabled the Scottish Office to reduce the number of Scottish police forces to 20 by 1968 through diplomacy and a thinly veiled threat of compulsion.

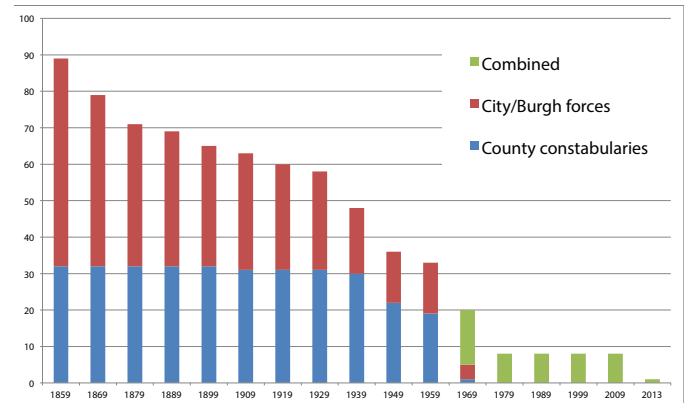
The final move to regionalisation, and the creation of the eight legacy forces that served Scotland from 1975 to 2013, was an effect of the broader strategy of local government reform rather than debate about policing needs. The very burgh councils who had opposed police reform were abolished in favour of the two-tier structure of regional and district councils. The only opposition to police regionalisation came from the Scottish borders, where there was a refusal to amalgamate with Edinburgh and the Lothians. However, MP David Steel’s attempt to stop this was blocked in the House of Commons when Labour and Conservative members voted together in support of regionalisation.

Although in place for 40 years, it can be argued that regionalisation paved the way for Police Scotland in severing ‘local’ policing from the constraints of municipal boundaries.

Awareness has also emerged that communities are often pluralised (rather than homogenous), and that they may be diasporic as well as geographically embedded. Further local government reform in 1996, which replaced the model of regional two-tier government with 32 unitary authorities, meant that even the administrative logic behind the creation of the eight regional police forces was effectively lost, although they retained their cultural identities for a further twenty years.

The policy opportunity that led to the creation of Police Scotland was historically unique although, like earlier proposals for reform, it was grounded in arguments about the need for economy and ever-greater efficiency. The rapidity with which it was created was unprecedented given the procrastination that had characterised amalgamation for the previous 150 years. The idea of a single Scottish police force, the existence of enthusiastic reformers, key moments of crisis, and awareness of the limitations of existing models, can all be found in the historical record. Yet there was no prior moment when these elements coalesced within an appropriate political context.

**Figure 1:**  
**Number of separate police forces in Scotland by year**



Source: Annual Reports of the Inspector of Constabulary for Scotland, 1859-2013.

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Our discussion draws on extensive archival materials held by the National Records of Scotland (NRS) that have been collected and analysed as part of a two-year project, funded by the Leverhulme Trust, on ‘Police and Community in Twentieth Century Scotland’.

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